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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how slang is not necessarily short-lived and novel. Users perceive these words, phrases, and meanings as new and they function as new, however, their novelty is only apparent rather than real. Data examined were gathered by students from fellow students at Michigan State University. Sources for comparison included the "Oxford English Dictionary," "The Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang," "The 1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue," "Slang and Its Analogues," "Slang and Unconventional English," "Slang is Not Novel," and "New Dictionary of American Slang." Three categories of slang were found: core slang, transient slang, and peripheral slang. Core slang is slang of long duration in time, transient slang is short lived and highly localized, and peripheral slang hovers between slang and informal discourse. Findings suggest that the novelty of slang is actually a pragmatic force, or that slang is a discourse marker that directs that some portion of the discourse be interpreted as informal and oral. It is concluded that slang is a marker for orality and informality, rather than novelty. (Contains 17 references.) (NAV)

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# Slang Is Not Novel

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> **Novel**: new and not resembling something formerly known or used, original or striking, *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed.*; strikingly new, unusual or different. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.*

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## Introduction and Definitions

My title for this talk is somewhat misleading, simply by virtue of the absoluteness of the claim. To a degree, slang is, of course, novel, but as I hope to show here, not in the ways or to the extent that it is often presented, in scholarly or lay discussions. The data I will present here indicate that a very high frequency of the phrases, words, and meanings which can be labeled as slang have long lives, some surprisingly long. I believe that these data will adequately support the contention that a substantial portion of slang is not at all new, not at all novel. The hypothesis that follows from these data is that the notion of novelty is an appearance, an aura. As users, we perceive these phrases, words, and meanings as new. They function as though they were new, despite the fact that they are not. Their discoursal function is to define the domain of the discourse, to add a tag which tells us how to interpret the intent of the discourse. To do this slang items add the feature set [+novel, +informal, -standard, -print, +oral] to all or part of the discourse, but [+novel] is not "new," it is "apparently new" or "perceived as new." I do not intend for the data presented today to fully support this hypothesis, only the first part, that a substantial portion of slang terms are not in fact newly minted, and I hope thereby to support the corollary that novelty is apparent rather than real.

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This talk focuses on novelty, but we need to keep the record straight before we plunge on. We all know that a single feature is usually insufficient

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to define a language category or type. Sociolinguists have long noted that dialects are circumscribed by feature sets, and that particular features, a given pronunciation (/r/-lessness) or syntactic structure (double modals), will often appear in several dialects. So too with slang; novelty by itself is not sufficient to distinguish slang from informal or "standard" lexicon. The feature [+novel] combines with other features to provide the feature set. Partridge gives fifteen reasons for the use of slang in an early chapter in *Slang To-day and Yesterday* (p. 6) and then later (chapter IV) recasts these uses as defining features. Spears (1982) offers ten "comments" about "the types of language called slang (p. xi)," comments which define contexts and discoursal functions for slang. Flexner (1975) and Lighter (1994) also give multiple feature definitions. Likewise, the feature [+novel] is not uniquely assigned to slang lexicon. *American Speech* carries a regular column titled "Among the New Words." When we look at the a recent complication of that column, *Fifty Years Among the New Words* (Algeo, 1991), we find neologisms generated between 1941 and 1991 such as *airlift, cease-fire, overkill, affirmative action, desegregation, sit-in, tokenism, lie detector, paper trail* and *condo* (p. 15), none of which would likely be categorized as slang.

However, novelty appears quite consistently on lists of defining features. In Partridge's list of ten uses just mentioned, the third is "to be 'different', to be novel." Spears' seventh comment in his list of ten is that "Slang that changes meaning or form fairly rapidly is often used by the young, who also change rather rapidly." Chapman (1986) remarks that the use of slang "is simultaneously an act of featuring and obtruding the self within the subculture--by cleverness, by control, *by up-to-dateness* [italics mine], by insolence, by virtuosities of audacious and usually satirical wit, by aggression (phallic if

you wish]." The *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th Edition* (1993) defines slang as "an informal nonstandard vocabulary composed typically of coinages, arbitrarily changed words, and extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech (p. 1102)." *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1976) defines slang as "usu. made up of short-lived coinages and figures of speech deliberately used in place of standard terms for effects such as raciness, humor or irreverence (p. 1279)." On the lay side, William Safire, now widely touted as The Language Maven (as least on his book covers) and introduced by Robin Mc Neil as the most widely read guru on language, characterizes American English as "slangy" in the *Story of English* series. McNeil then uses that to open a segement in which he presents surfer slang and Valley Talk, underscoring the notion of novelty.

And finally, at least for our purposes here, the latest and most comprehensive dictionary of slang, *The Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (1994), edited by Jonathan Lighter, begins, as one might expect, with a discussion of the selectional criteria for the dictionary. As a starting point for his discussion, Lighter offers this definition:

> an informal, nonstandard, nontechnical vocabulary composed chiefly of novel-sounding synonyms for standard words and phrases (xi).

It is important to note here that Lighter has adopted the phrase *novel-sounding*. His dictionary is, after all, a historical dictionary, and its very existence is evidence that some significant portion of slang is not novel in the sense of 'new,' 'different,' or 'up-to-date.' Likewise, a significant portion of slang is not transitory or ephemeral. It may indeed be novel-sounding, but is not in fact novel. Neither Lighter nor I am the first to note that not all slang is new. Mencken (1937) says, "There are, indeed, slang terms that have survived for

centuries, never dropping quite out of use and yet never attaining to good usage (p. 566)." A partial list of some of the items he noted, with their dates is: *to frisk* 'to search" 1781, *to grease* 'to bribe' 1557; *to blow* 'to boast' c. 1400; *gas* 'empty talk' 1847; *jug* 'prison' 1834; *lip* 'insolence' 1821; *sap* 'fool' 1815; *murphy* 'potato' 1811; *racket* 'noise' 1785; *bread-basket* 'stomach' 1753; *hush-money* 'to assure silence' 1709; *hick* 'rural person' 1690; *gold mine* 'profitable venture' 1664; *grub* 'food' 1659; *rot-gut* 'cheap/bad liquor' 1597; *bones* 'dice' c. 1300; *lousy* 'bad/undesirable' 1690 (Am. 1910); *booze* 'whiskey' c. 1300; and *nuts* 'to like a lot' 1840 (p. 566). I have not checked the accuracy of Mencken's dating (I leave that to Lighter). The point is that he recognized the longevity of many items. In his "Preface" to Farmer and Henley, Bernstein (1970) says "some specimens are still as alive as they ever were (*stash* shows no signs of senility after two centuries, and *booze*, as is well known, improves with age). Still other forms have died and been reincarnated in slightly different forms. . . .(Preface, p. 1, but no p. # given)." Cromie (1971) notes in his preface to the *1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* that

> [t]he book may surprise you, by the way, as it did me, with the great number of expressions which have remained unchanged for almost two centuries. Some have attained respectability, but to balance this there are others which are considered vulgar despite the erosion of the years (Preface, p. 2, but no p. # given).

Despite these recognitions, the emphasis has remained on the novel and transitory aspects of slang. Longevity has been regarded as "surprising," a curiosity, and when we look at what little research on slang there is, the details of longevity have clearly not been worth pursuing; the really interesting and most productive feature to focus on has been novelty. The expectation seems to have been that the number of older terms in any given collection, the number would be relatively few; these older terms would indeed be curiosities. But what does it mean if

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we find that not just some, but a large number of active slang terms are older terms, not new minted coinages? I will return to that question later.

I began a collection of slang at my home university for reasons other than those addressed in this presentation. I was (and still am) interested in regional variation and needed a contemporary controlled corpus for comparisons. I also wanted to look at origination and transmission. Does slang arise in younger student populations and travel upward with the students, or does it originate in older populations and travel down to younger? However, as the collection grew, it became apparent that many of the terms were hardly new at all. Why! even I at my advanced age recognized a good many as older terms, if not from my high school days, then certainly from the 60s and 70s, at least a generation old. I knew Mencken's list of old terms, and that knowledge coupled with my impression that the slang that I was collecting was not entirely novel led me to look at the balance of new and old in the corpus I was collecting.

Methodology

I will return to that balance in a moment, but a brief discussion of the methodology is necessary. The data analyzed here was collected by students in my classes. In this case, the research grew out of the pedagogy. I wanted students doing real language work, collecting and analyzing language data. One of the avenues to this goal was the collection of slang from their peers, primarily because this sort of sociolinguist data was readily accessible. My data are taken from their studies (with their permission). Some of the studies were based on questionnaires, some on interviews, some on observation, depending on their particular focus. There are, of course, advantages and disadvantages to such data collection procedures. The major disadvantage is the potential lack of accuracy and completeness. Some items may be generated for the study, are not

actually in use, or may be used by a very small group. Contrawise, widely used terms, simply by chance or collection techniques, may not appear in the data. The first disadvantage can be alleviated by testing the data in a larger population. That is yet to be done. The second can be corrected by continuing collection. That is being done.

The major advantage is simply that the users of this particular language are the suppliers of the data. They belong to networks and through them can get natural, oral, present-time data. The orality is of great importance, because slang is preeminently oral, and the present-time collection frame insures that the data contain items which are in use but which may vanish (on the grounds that slang is transitory, usually made up of short lived coinages). Most collections are based on print sources, which by their very nature are highly unlikely to contain those very short-lived coinages which are seen to be the core of slang. On balance, I traded the disadvantage of suspect data gathered by uncertain field techniques for the advantage of natural, present-time data.

I will make one final comment about the data collection, then I will turn to the analysis. The definition of slang is, of course, notoriously difficult. Many have tried; none have succeeded in providing a definition that will please us all. (Perhaps the most usable definition is that given by Dumas and Lighter (1978).) The data base I am working with contains items which the respondents or the researchers judged to be slang. The data that I use here accepts their implicit definitions of slang, whatever they might be. Dumas and Lighter note that "[o]ne of the cliches of [the study of slang] is that anyone can recognize slang, but no one can define it." They go on to suggest that "[t]he reverse may be closer to the truth (p. 10)." As I discuss the data, some items may lie outside your particular limit for what constitutes slang. They may be informal

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or even standard in your idiolect. I certainly do not always agree with the characterization of some of the items in the data base as slang. For example, one or more of the data sources has listed the following terms as slang. It is important to note that with only one exception, one or more of the slang dictionaries consulted also lists them.

*beautiful*, listed in Partridge

*coke*, the drink, listed in Partridge and Chapman

*down*, in the sense 'depressed,' listed in Farmer and Henley, Partridge, and Chapman

*gigolo*, not listed in any

*drunk*, listed in DVT, F&H, Part, Chap

Are they slang? Not in my idiolect, but in the idiolect of the respondents they are. To some degree, we must accept idiosyncratic boundaries. In fact, most terms in the data base would likely be accepted as slang or highly informal, that is satisfying at least one or more of the conditions advanced by Dumas and Lighter, (although Dumas and Lighter want two for a term to be slang).

The Data

The basic question is: in a given corpus of slang words and phrases, what is the balance between old and new items. But that question raises another one: what do we mean by "old" and "new." How old do you have to be to be "old" if you are a slang word? A few hours? A few days? A few years? How many years? Is a slang word that has been around for five years an old one? 10 years? 20 years? It would seem that with the emphasis on "short-lived coinage," novelty and ephemerality, any word that lasts beyond ten years should be considered old, therefore, any slang term that was used before 1985 is old, especially in student populations. We can set more stringent requirements. Any word that lasts beyond

a generation (the average span of time between the birth of parents and the birth of their offspring) should be considered old. If we accept twenty years as a generation, we can then tentatively establish 1975 as a cut-off point. Any slang item that was used before 1975 is old. (Unfortunately, we do not have some equivalent of Johnson's dictionary which we can use as a reference point, to help us decide where to place that point. Because of Johnson's dictionary, we can say: If the word has not been used since 1755, it is obsolete (Mish, p. 17a).)

At the other end of the time continuum, when did slang begin? Lighter (1994) maintains that we cannot really label words as being slang before c. 1660, the Restoration period, because "standard" English did not exist before that time, hence the concept of slang could not exist before that time, although cant, criminal jargon did. Partridge (1954) seems to agree. Slang arose as a response to Standard. If they are right, and I think there are some compelling arguments on their side, then words older than 1660 cannot be slang. Informal perhaps. Maybe jocular. Cant certainly. But not slang. Our beginning is 1660 and our end is 1975 or 1985. These are good working dates, and they give us a way of assessing the data, but it would be premature to establish this framework too firmly at this point.

To establish the longevity of individual items, I consulted six sources. The results from two of the searches, the *OED* and Lighter's first volume, are not far enough along to be included in this presentation. The analysis of the remaining four sources are also in process, but there is enough data to undertake preliminary analysis and draw some tentative conclusions. The four sources are: *The 1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, representing one source from about a century and a half ago, Farmer and Henley's *Slang and Its Analogues* from about a hundred years ago, Partridge's *Slang and Unconventional English*, the 1984

edition, and from the same period, 1986, Chapman's *New Dictionary of American Slang*. All four sources were consulted for each entry in the data base. The following information was recorded: whether the item appeared, a simple yes/no decision; if it did (if yes), whether it had the same or a closely allied meaning for the part of speech which occurs in the data base; if there was the same or a closely allied meaning, the date of its appearance if a date was given. Not unlike the earlier discussion on the definition for slang, I assumed that a word listed in a slang dictionary is slang.

The count for this presentation is then rather straight forward. Senses rather than items are counted. How many *no* occurrences are there--senses of words or phrases that do not occur in any of the four sources? How many that do occur? Of those that do, how many have the same or a closely allied meaning? How many have a different meaning? That is, how many are listed as slang, but have a meaning different from the meaning in the data base. The data here are for the letters A through K.

The data are simple to present, but require some interpretation. In A through K, there are 412 entries with a total of 460 senses. The gross breakdown is:

No entry in any of the four sources, that is "new" terms = 153 (33%)

The same meaning or a closely allied one, that is "old" terms = 244 (53%)

A different meaning = 63 (14%)

If we subdivide the "same meaning" category into earlier and later works, that is put the figures for the *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* and Farmer and Henley in one group and those for Partridge and Chapman in another, we then have 45 same or similar entries for the older sources and 199 for the newer sources. If we do the same for the "different" category, the older total is 32, the newer 31.

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The data clearly show that genuine novelty is questionable as a salient characteristic of slang. Only 33% of the senses in the data base are "new," where "new" is defined as not occurring before 1985. 53% occur before this date. We can tweak the figures in favor of newness or against it, depending on how we wish to interpret the "different" category, which constitutes the remaining 14% of the senses. We can contend that this 14% belongs to the "new" category, on the grounds that the senses are different, raising our "new" total to 47%. On the other hand, we can maintain that the words in the "different" category are slang, thus are not short-lived coinages or new senses for standard words. They are new only in the sense that their slang meaning has changed, but they have been slang for quite some time. Some of the new and old meanings are very different, but in some cases, the new and old meanings are related. For example, in Farmer and Henley, *fresh* means 'forward, impudent.' While in my data base it means 'pleasing,' a shift from negative to positive. In Partridge, the meaning of *gay* is given as "serene, all's well, all is correct," while in my data base it means 'bad, stupid, or ridiculous.' Given these sorts of meaning shifts, we can justify adding the "different" category to the "old" category, bringing that percentage to 67%, two-thirds of the data base.

One problem we must face here is the paucity of etymological and historical data. The 45 senses from the older sources group are clearly at least 100 years old, although they may be older. Farmer and Henley give us dates for some items, but not all. We have the same problem in the younger group, Partridge and Chapman. Some dates are given, but for those senses which are not dated, we must make guesses about their longevity. To put it another way, of the 199 senses in the "same" category, for the younger sources, we really do not have a very good idea of how old some of those senses are. We know that they are at least 10

years old, but many may be considerably older. The initial data from Lighter indicates that, in general, we can expect many of them to be quite old. The 45 older/199 younger split is likely to tilt in favor of the older as new historical data is generated, further weakening genuine novelty as significant in defining slang. For example, in the As, Lighter adds this information on longevity:

> *ace* (1955), *airhead* (1972), *alchie* (1844), *all-nighter* (1964), *annihilated* (1975), *ass* 'buttocks' (1672), *asshole* (1784), *awse* 'awesome' (1989), *awesome* (1976), and *ax* 'reject' (1883)

Note that only two of the ten items appear after our more conservative date of 1975.

Perhaps we can gain some further insight by looking at those items for which we do have dates (supplied by one of the four sources).

| | |
|---|---|
| 1200 | *fuck* (v) |
| 1500 | *fuck* (n) |
| C16 | *flat (out)* 'seriously' |
| 1659 | *grub* 'food' |
| 1728 | *funds* |
| 1781 | *frisk* |
| 1800 | *damn* Part: SE until c1800 |
| 1824 | *gal* |
| 1840 | *darky* |
| 1870 | *get (it) on* 'copulate' |
| | *going out/with/steady* 'dating' |
| M1800 | *dick* 'penis' |
| L1800 | *floozie* |
| | *gash* |
| 1870 | *dude* 'male or female' also *dudette* |
| 1871 | *drunk*, Part =1871, but in DVT as 'drunk as a wheelbarrow, as David's sow |
| 1887 | *fag* 'cigarette' |
| 1889 | *dope* 'marijuana' |
| E1900 | *fly* 'stylish, attractive' |
| | *ditch* 'reject' |
| 1918 | *egghead* |
| 1920s | *fag* 'homosexual male' |
| | *doorknob* 'unintelligent person' |
| 1920 | *ganja* |
| 1925 | *golddigger* |
| | *dip* |

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| | |
|---|---|
| 1930s | *grind* 'dry hump' |
| 1935 | *dyke* |
| 1945 | *fatso* |
| | *dump* |
| 1950 | *drag* 'unpleasant or boring situation or person' |
| 1960 | *faggot* |
| | *groovy* |
| 1965 | *grass* |
| | *dig* |
| L1960s | *go* 'say' |
| 1970s | *dork* 'harmless fool' |
| 1970 | *druggie* |
| L1970s | *freak* |
| 1980s | *dog* 'unattractive person' |
| C20 | *greasy* 'dirty' |

Of the 102 items on the list, 5 originate before the 17th century, 2 in the 17th century, 3 in the 18th, 36 in the 19th, 43 in the 20th before the 1970s, and the remaining 13 after 1970. This is not a list of new words.

Based on these data, I believe we must conclude that because slang has a significant "old" component, the novelty we perceive is not based on the fact that the terms we hear or use are really new. The novelty we perceive in slang is something else. Perhaps it should be characterized as pragmatic, contextually derived meaning. Whether we treat a word as slang or as standard is determined by the context, the text in which it occurs, and by its pragmatic force in that text. However, it might be better to characterize slang items as discourse markers indicating that the discourse or some portion of the discourse is to be interpreted as informal. The discourse is to be perceived as novel and informal, not necessarily the particular item. We can say with some certainty that these data do confirm Lighter's adoption of the term *novel-sounding*, and Dumas and Lighter's (1978) comment that Gleason's definition of slang "overlooks the fact that novelty in a locution is apparent rather than real newness (p. 7)." But this redefinition raises other questions. What aspects of the discourse enable us to recognize slang when we hear it, and why do we regard slang as novel when

it frequently is not? What characteristics do the old terms and the new ones share that enable us to treat them as though they were all new?

Perhaps we are not dealing with novelty at all, and we should drop the notion of novelty from definitions of slang, on the grounds that it is not the novelty but other characteristics that are salient for recognizing slang and its pragmatic/discoursal function. The issue seems to be somewhat more complex than a yes/no vote on novelty. As we have seen, many, perhaps most, slang terms are not novel. But the data indicate that many slang terms are in fact nonce terms. If we take the Hs as an example set, we find these terms: *hats in the air* (yay), *heat seeking missile* (penis), *Heisman* (end a relationship), *Helen's boyfriend* (boring person), *he shoots, he scores* (succeed), *Herby* (penis), *horizontal aerobics* (copulate), *huge* (fun), *human vacuum* (substantial eater), *hummer* (fellatio), and *hurl* (vomit).

Let us postulate three categories of slang. The first of these, **core slang**, is the set of words which persist as slang in some meaning or another over many years or even centuries. This group seems to have an amazing stability. They are not new and hence do not contribute novelty to the discourse. The second is **transient slang**, that group of terms we typically think of as slang, items that are nonce terms, short lived and often highly localized. The third category, **peripheral slang**, are those items that hover in that indefinable region between slang and informal, but seem not to rise to formal standard status (here defined as usable in a wide range or registers and styles without exciting notice or comment), or if they do tend to be unstable (*swanky*, for example).

Each of these categories adds something a little different to the discourse, marks the discourse is particular ways. However, all carry the feature [+oral, -formal], no matter how old they are and no matter where they

appear, in print or in conversation. Slang is then a marker for orality and informality. It is set against Joos' (1961) formal or Wolfram and Fasold's (1974) superstandard which carry the features [+print, +formal]. Because slang arises from and marks orality, it shares features with oral discourse genres such as jokes, which are passed along from generation to generation, and each generation believes that the joke originates with is own generation. Each generation believes that "one potato, two potato" was newly generated by them. Hence, slang, because it is oral like jokes and children's rhymes, carries the marker [+novel] because it is novel from the speaker's viewpoint.

The relationship of slang to the notions of overt and covert prestige (Trudgill 1972) are intriguing. Although I am not sure that we can say that slang is covertly prestigious, we certainly can say that slang does not carry overt prestige. Slang is clearly disfavored by the establishment. One of the characters in "Little Women" admonishes her sister, "Don't say *awful*; it's slang." African American English is often popularly characterized as "slangy." Criminals use slang. Rebellious teenagers use slang. In other words, disfavored groups use slang. Those lects which have been characterized in the sociolinguistic research as carrying covert prestige tend to be working class dialects and can be characterized as [+oral] and therefore to some degree as [+novel], with the understanding that [+novel] means "apparently novel, treated as novel." Overtly prestigious varieties are then [+print, +formal] while covertly prestigious varieties are [+oral, +novel].

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